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TSJ COVER STORY

The quiet professionals



Training the FBI's tactical elite

By GINA CAVALLARO

At a small compound inside U.S. Marine Corps Base Quantico in Virginia, in the shadow of the FBI Academy, federal law enforcement's most exclusive tactical operations team quietly trains.

And trains.

And trains.

And trains.

They're members of the FBI Hostage Rescue Team (HRT), and they'd rather not see any reporters, but they quietly accept the presence of one as they go about their business.

Next to a parking lot, a small group fires live ammunition on a compact outdoor range, practicing magazine changing drills - over and over.

At the team's Tactical Firearms Training Center (TFTC), where the operators practice close-quarters battle, a row of doors - dozens and dozens of new doors - are still wrapped in plastic. The doors get kicked, beaten and blown up during training. And then more doors are brought in.

"We go through 30 doors a day, easily," said HRT unit chief Charles Pierce.

The hangarlike facility is dominated by an overhead grid of steel beams with rubber-coated walls that slide into different room configurations. Cameras and microphones are affixed to the grid, and a cat-

An FBI Hostage Rescue Team member practices reloading rifle magazines in this scene from a video about the team's training regimen at Quantico, Va. To see the whole video online, go to www.militarytimes.com/multimedia and enter "FBI, agents, military" in the video search field.

- SHEILA VEMMER, TSJ

walk for observers straddles the maze.

During live-fire exercises, lethal frangible bullets are pulverized when they strike the rubber facing, which is designed to avoid fragments and ricochets. After a flash-bang grenade is popped, the billowing plume of acrid smoke wafts out through the building's gaping side openings.

On the other side of the catwalk, high above the ground floor across from the close-quarters battle grid, a mock-up of a commercial jetliner is used for aircraft rescue training.

Inside, a ghoulish collection of mannequins missing chunks of heads, arms and torsos awaits the next exercise in a half-lit cabin that is outfitted with canned audio recordings of screams, blasts and gunfire and a smoke generator for simulated chaos. At the far end of the TFTC, a four-story tower with interior and exterior stairways and an elevator allows operators to practice fast roping, hoisting, different breaching techniques and hostage rescue.

At the Tactical Helicopter Unit's hangar, a climbing wall is scuffed and worn from so much use, and the aviators fly every day.

And then there are the dogs. They're furry, eager, low maintenance, and they've been on the team for only a month, so everyone's still learning how to train with them. One is a 70-pound black Czech shepherd named [REDACTED] who, one operator says, "acts like all the new guys." During a recent briefing before a fast-rope training exercise, [REDACTED] new-guy status was on full display when he was singled out for being unable to contain his excitement. Sitting on the cold cement in front of the helicopter amid the legs of two dozen men clad in olive drab tactical gear, [REDACTED] trembled and wept so loudly his handler, Stan, yelled at the dog and then invited him to sit at his side in the helicopter's doorway. [REDACTED] licked Stan, who wiped the slimy kiss from his mouth and kept on talking. [REDACTED] kept on shaking. For the dog, it's all about the game.

"If you feel like you're throwing them out of the helicopter, you are - and that's OK. They've done it before," Stan told the men of the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team, who were introduced to [REDACTED] and his counterpart, a Belgian Malinois named [REDACTED] in mid-December when they arrived at the team's compound fresh from their own training at an undisclosed location.

The HRT's training calendar now reflects the presence of the dogs, who live with their handlers but spend their work-



ing days mingling with the men and the administrative staff, their new "pack" of friends, at the compound. The addition of the dogs has already altered the tenor of the team's training sessions as team members get used to thinking of them as counterparts, operators with the same high standard of training and ability to engage in dangerous activities.

Aside from the possibility of receiving an unwanted lick on the lips from one of them, the dogs' natural behavioral tendencies and tactical uses are being woven into the operators' psyche and opening new possibilities for the teams' performance capabilities.

"Everyone's learning how to add them into everything we do," said [REDACTED] handler, Paul, who, like Stan, preferred to keep his full identity confidential for operational security reasons. "It's a change everyone's been in favor of, and now we have requests for training missions from people wanting to know how the dogs can be used."

[REDACTED] as the more social of the two, will be tasked primarily with protection detail, while [REDACTED] has a more aggressive offensive capability, the "bite dog" that can immobilize a man of any size.

Training will remain the same as it always has, said Paul, and "the goal is to integrate the team completely."

AN EXPANDED MISSION

The HRT was created in 1983 in response to a counterterrorism capability gap in federal law enforcement. Special weapons action teams were stood up 10 years earlier, but in the early 1980s a wave of domestic and international terrorist events forced the FBI to go a step further in its capacity to react.

Today the HRT is one of the most coveted assignments in the FBI and by far the most difficult to get because of the highly discriminating and difficult qualification and selection process.

"There was a recognized need in the U.S. government to develop a tactical capability that gave the civilian law enforcement community a counterterrorist community

comparable to that that exists in the military," HRT director Steve Fiddler said. "The selection process is one that identifies an individual with certain traits that we have determined over the years makes a very good tactical operator."

Hijackings, prison riots, manhunts and right-wing extremist cases dominated the

"Rescuing Hostages is but a part of the full range of capabilities that we train and are prepared to respond to."

STEVE FIDDLER
FBI HOSTAGE RESCUE TEAM
DIRECTOR



team's activities in the years after it was established. In the 25 years that have passed since the creation of the HRT, Fiddler said, "rescuing hostages is but a part of the full range of capabilities that we train and are prepared to respond to."

Many of the team's operators come in with a military background, but few people make the cut and fewer still are interested in the HRT's demanding lifestyle, so the team is chronically understrength, Fiddler said. In 2007, the team launched its Tactical Recruiting Program (TRP) seeking applicants who could potentially qualify based on their military experience.

The requirement to attend the FBI Academy and work first as a special agent in a field office still applies, but recruits brought in through the TRP can try out for the team earlier - after two years as an agent instead of the usual three.

The team's mission expanded in scope and importance in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, paralleling the military's elite special operations teams in the frequency of its deployments and focus, with the subtle difference that HRT operators are law enforcement agents with responsibility for making arrests, processing scenes for evidence recovery and testifying in court, at home and abroad.

The HRT uses some of the most sophisticated law enforcement equipment avail-

able in firearms, technological tools of the trade, enhanced viewing devices, optical sighting devices on weapons systems, stand-alone night vision equipment, thermal imagery, sophisticated breaching techniques and a growing aviation capability that includes the addition of eight Black Hawk helicopters.

In early 2006, the HRT created its newest small unit, a mobility team that delivers and extracts operators in a variety of conveyances. [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] are just the newest resources in a tactical toolbox that looks more like the military's arsenal all the time.

Members of the Hostage Rescue Team, including a military working dog, head for a helicopter during a fast-roping exercise.

More significant than the tools, however, is the men's uncompromising commitment to one another and to a year-round training schedule that drives their culture of excellence. Today, when they work beside their military counterparts overseas, Pierce said, the coordination is practically seamless.

"Our relationship with [the military] has always been strong. Now those relationships are at heights that have never before been experienced because of our joint efforts," Pierce said.





A YEAR IN THE LIFE

In each day's schedule, Pierce said, there is a two- to three-hour block for lunch and a workout in the team's gym or on the grounds of the vast military base. But the "bread and butter" training events, according to Pierce, are close-quarters battle, firearms and sniper training.

"Those are our core skill sets. The other things are built around that," he said.

The specialized demands of the tactical operator require a higher level of stamina, physical prowess and dedication than that of an average FBI agent because of the on-call nature of their jobs and the extreme conditions in which they often find themselves at any given moment. So HRT operators commit themselves to long-term training challenges that condition them to sustain missions that can pop up on a moment's notice and last up to 80 days.

"We have to maintain the judgment requirements to stay on the edge of tactical decision making for long periods of time without a reduction in the mental attitude towards the successful completion of that mission, especially when it's a long duration," Fiddler said.

The team typically works a five-day week when they are not deployed and work through a 120-day training cycle that repeats three times a year, with some minor exceptions. For example, every other week, there is one day allotted for gear maintenance and discretionary time to be used by team leaders is built into the routine.

The number of men on the team is well under 500, though Pierce would not elaborate on an exact figure.

The team regularly trains for cold weather and maritime operations, urban and rural operations, medical emergencies, insertion and extraction with fast ropes, hoists and rappelling.

The team, including the dogs, lives to train. Members regularly exchange lessons learned, techniques and training scenarios with their military counterparts to closely align their operating procedures.

"It's all to get us into a position where we can accomplish our mission, and we've got to be able to do that in any environment," Pierce said.

But unlike the military, whose aircraft are not always in the same location as the tactical operators, the HRT's Tactical Helicopter Unit is literally right out the front door on a low hilltop and a new ramp is being built for the delivery of the Black Hawks.

"The nice thing about it is if all of a sudden a call comes in and we're put on standby for a mission in San Francisco for a helicopter insertion, we can walk up the hill and say, 'This has come in and this is what we want to work,'" Pierce said.

HRT operators can be called upon to do quick deployments for special missions or they may schedule 120-day deployments overseas. Other events that require an HRT presence, like this year's massive, multi-event presidential inauguration in Washington, D.C., Pierce said, "are more

obvious."

The HRT also participates in at least one major combined exercise every 12 to 18 months that involves a variety of governmental entities such as the FBI and the departments of Defense, State, Energy and Homeland Security.

Combined exercises can be tailored for specific scenarios, such as a hijacking, which would involve agencies such as the U.S. Transportation Safety Administration and the Federal Aviation Administration, Pierce said.

Others also include foreign operators and governments, which has engendered closer ties and a good return on the investment. "Interoperability with all these agencies is much more robust than prior to 9/11," Pierce said.

The team travels around the country a few times a year for a variety of scheduled specialty training, like ice climbing, maritime operations, desert environment operations, all of which will now include working with the dogs, who have their own tactical backpacks and personal wear items, like vests with clips and hooks for hoists and drops, and cold-weather booties. Stan told the group during the recent fast-rope exercise, "tends to hold on as he goes down, he'll try to hang on to the skid."

Not one to disappoint, [redacted] did, in fact, extend his paws toward the aircraft's frame before descending to the ground on a special tether, then wildly wagged his tail as if to say, "Let's do it again," keeping with the team's relentless training mantra. ■